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ABSTRACT

An instructor of a composition and computers writing course (designed for economically and culturally disadvantaged students) at the State University of New York at Buffalo, developed electronic conferences which combine the capabilities of the computer with the conference approach. The instructor reads students' papers while sitting at the computer and then begins to type, in a conversational format, her comments, ideas, suggestions and examples, geared to the needs and stage of writing of the students. Students continue to revise their papers until they feel the papers are ready for a grade. Final drafts get an analytical scoring and a grade, minus any further comment. Students' oral and written comments in course evaluations and journal entries indicate that students find written comments more helpful than any other type of response. Using the computer as a writing tool for electronic feedback means that writing teachers can generate more and better text in far less time than if they handwrote detailed comments. Electronic conferencing helps writing teachers to read and respond to student papers like a real reader. Teachers' responses should indicate the teachers' writing priorities to the students. Comments should also be specific. One solution to the dilemma that students must be computer literate and accomplished writers is for students to write multiple drafts, each handed back with a lengthy computer-generated comment page of detailed, organized, sensitive commentary; personal feelings and reflections; and clear suggestions and strategies for revision. (Two figures are included; 16 references are attached.) (RS)

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Feedback that Works: Using the Computer to Respond

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Feedback that Works: Using the Computer to Respond

I teach a composition and computers writing course at the University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY., that is designed for economically and culturally disadvantaged students, the majority of whom are ethnic minorities.

Originally the writing course was taught in a regular classroom where we spent a great deal of time in peer and teacher conferencing. Two years ago I switched to teaching in a brand new Macintosh lab.

Thus, I faced the task of teaching basic Macintosh computer knowledge, an unfamiliar word processing program, and academic writing skills at the same time. I found that there was no time for conferencing during class and therefore, I needed to revise my tactics in order to meet changing student needs.

I decided to experiment with more written feedback and came up with a method that incorporated the powerful capabilities of the computer with the conference approach–something I called an electronic conference–unfortunately, not networked, because of current limitations in the lab, but a system which is easily adaptable. Although the name might be a misnomer, the term "electronic conference" indicates to my students that my written comments, my feedback, is intended to guide and help, but not to be the final authority.

I was aware of the body of literature which says that teacher comments on student papers are often ignored and seldom have any discernible effect on strengthening future papers, but, I realized that that literature is usually discussing papers that are handed in, corrected, handed back, and filed.

Gary Dohrer, in an article in College Teaching, discusses research indicating that when teachers make remarks on papers and return those papers to students while offering them no opportunity to revise, the remarks have little effect on subsequent papers. But, when researchers, such as George Hillocks, studied the effect of teachers' comments on papers upon subsequent drafts of papers, they

found that students' revisions in response to teachers' comments were associated with significantly higher quality ratings, nearly twice that for students receiving comments but doing no revision.

I read each of my students' papers while sitting at the computer and then begin to type, in a conversational format, my comments, ideas, suggestions and examples, geared to the needs and stage of writing of the students. I type my comments into a template I have set up which incorporates a combination of tables and text. I have my students continue to revise their papers until they feel the papers are ready for a grade. Early drafts simply get a page or two of response and feedback (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Computer Feedback Template

William Brusseau	Summer Job

William, what a terrific experience! I really felt that if you hadn't put your name on the paper, I could still tell who wrote it because it tells so much about you personally. I like how you trace the story chronologically, and tell in detail about how you felt in the beginning. Your conclusion is a nice wrap-up because you tell why the job was valuable and how important it was financially.

Now, let's talk about some ways to rethink and revise your paper. The majority of your paper discusses applying for and getting the job, but you crunch the actual experience into one paragraph. I think you need to expand on the job itself more. Or, make the focus of your paper applying for, interviewing for, and training for the job and end it there. Of course that deletes most of the last page. You need to decide exactly what you want to get across to your reader. I don't think you want to write all about your summer job - that could be a book - so what particular aspects do you want to focus on?

William, think about . . .

Later drafts get further comments and sometimes an analytical scoring guide with six different numerical scores which average into a grade for that paper (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Computer Feedback Template with Analytical Scoring for Later Drafts

Lennox Shaka	Ideas and Content	4.5	Word Choice	3.5
	Organization	3.0	Sentence Fluency	4.2
	Voice	4.5	Conventions	4.4
	Total:	27.70	Average: 3.96 [B+]	**Grade**: B+

You have a good introduction and your focus statement is very clear. I like how you give some historical information to the homeless problem.

You gave strong, informative examples of your points for dealing with problems, but then you lump several together in one paragraph. It would have been better if you had followed the same format and said something about each one in a separate paragraph just as you did previously.

On page two . . .

The final draft simply gets the analytical scoring and grade, minus any further comment. I print out two copies, one for my records, and one to attach to each student's paper.

As a teacher, I prefer oral conferencing, I find it most effective. But, in the book, Responding to Student Writing, Sarah Freedman found that as a group, the students she surveyed claim that written comments on finished pieces are more helpful than any other type of response. My students' oral and written comments in course evaluations and journal entries seem to echo Freedman's findings, although it may result from a lack of familiarity with oral conferencing. One student said that: **The comments are great, it's exactly what I was looking for in a class. The comments will be utilized for my updates.** (Keep in mind, of course that these students are writing to their teacher, but it is also these remarks and constant feedback by my students which helps me monitor and evaluate my comments.)

My students told me that sometimes after verbal conferences they would often forget much of what had been discussed. They liked having concrete examples to look at and ponder. They liked the explanations they could refer back to, and they liked having a clear, ordered list of suggestions and strategies for

revision. James noted: **The first thing I did to revise paper #1 was to look at the comments you made. Afterwards I had a clear picture of what I had to revise. I tried to fix my opening paragraph and add some more examples of how Kirby Puckett was my positive role model. During the process of revision I had to delete some of my original work in order to revise my paper** My students began to value my written comments precisely because they were in black and white. After the initial shock of receiving so much printed material attached to their corrected papers wore off, my students told me that the fact that I had invested so much time seemed to give their own efforts validity and made them feel that their work was meaningful. They also said that having a guide for their revisions made them feel less apprehensive and far more confident.

I found that the succeeding drafts my students handed in showed a marked increase in content and organizational revision, along with better editing. Students were aware of this also. As Paul said: **Sometimes I put commas where they do not belong and also I make some sentences too short. I see my writing differently than I did in January because my papers seem to have more information and content than before. But I see my writing getting better as I go along further. By writing on the computer it has made writing a little bit easier for me. The computer also made it easier for me to make corrections on my paper faster.**

As my students handed in new papers for comments, I found that many problems or weak points which had been worked on in multiple drafts of previous papers no longer appeared. Cherline thought so too when she remarked: **I feel that the comments do help me. They prevent me from making the same mistakes that I've made on past papers. I will definitely put much more time into it, then hopefully my sentences will be a lot more clearer, and my composition will be a lot more exciting to read. One thing a reader hates is a dull paper, and that is why I will avoid writing one.**

Why would other teachers use electronic feedback?

One reason is that using the computer as a writing tool for electronic feedback means that you can generate more text and better text in far less time than if you hand wrote detailed comments. For the same amount of time spent handwriting shorter comments, not only can the quantity be greater, but particularly the quality of comments generated on the computer can be enriched.

Stephen Tchudi brings up a second reason to use electronic conferencing. He wrote that it takes him less time to write a note of personal response on a paper than to mull through and write out detailed, pedagogically oriented evaluative comments.

Third, as Doug Brent relates, computers allow teachers to fine-tune, polish and revise their own comments. I usually reread what I have written. Sometimes I need to add clarification, or I need to tone down criticism, or review the instances where my personal bias has crept in.

Brent also gives a fourth reason which reminds us that instead of a student turning his paper sideways and deciphering our scrawled advice, the student can turn to a neatly printed page of comments stapled to the end of a relatively clean paper. Certain comments can be keyed to the student's text with reference numbers handwritten at appropriate places in the paper, but those may be the only handwritten marks.

For many of us, another reason is that sitting upright at the keyboard is physically less painful than bending over papers, fingers aching from writing. Brent says that most of us spend long hours composing thousands of tiny pieces of discourse, prodding, explaining, encouraging, questioning the text whose margins we labor to fill in. As a result we finish each term crippled by not only the psychological but also the physical toll exacted by writing these crabbed little

expositions, turned sideways and sandwiched into whatever white space is available around our students' prose.

This method is not a shortcut. You may spend the same amount of time, but the task has changed–from replacing theme annotation and cryptic marginal comments to that of pages of conversation, a shift from "correction" to more of a "response." The computer can be used as a writing tool that streamlines the mechanics of writing so the instructor has more time and physical stamina to respond extensively and sensitively.

What are the pedagogical implications for Electronic Feedback?

Stephen Tchudi reminds us that students need to experience immediate success with writing; that a writing classroom should be a whole language classroom where writing is a real, important experience for students. Tchudi says that teachers should 'respond' to student writing, and 'to respond' means to react openly and directly, as a 'person' rather than as a teacher (p. 101).

In the book, Ways of Knowing, Cleo Martin says that we should use the Four R's of response which should stand for:

READ AND RESPOND LIKE A REAL READER (p. 112).

We should respond to student writing in a 'transactional' manner, as Louise Rosenblatt describes it, - not decoding a text, but participating in a transaction with the text and we need to provide a window for this transaction by showing the writer what the text does for a reader. Since we can type more text in a computer than in physical writing, our response usually results in a genuine interactive response, more expansive and more humane than longhand comments. I often spend time talking about my feelings, how the essay has affected me.

There is software designed to automate response, but it does just that–it automates. There are programs which mark routine errors, and insert abbreviated

correction codes, or which have pre-composed paragraphs of advice which the teacher inserts into student text as appropriate spots, or a teacher can enter three letter codes which will then generate a page of personalized comments chosen from a menu of possible comments. But these programs are just on-line handbooks which give coded generic statements to students.

When students are presented with a separate sheet of responsive comments, and few marks, if any, on their papers, their view of their papers is less fragmented and global. Students often feel that revision is addressing and correcting all the mistakes teachers note on their papers. Dohrer says that on papers with handwritten comments, students usually begin with the first comment and proceed through the paper by jumping from one comment to the next or randomly from one to another, often skipping large segments of the text and making a statement like, "This page must be all right; the teacher didn't find any problems." Because they read only the parts with comments, students do not establish clear, global concepts of their work (p.51).

Rather, our comments should reflect our main concerns. But if 60 to 80 percent of teacher comments deal with editing issues, which studies have shown to be true, students will infer that grammatical correctness is a top priority. Students will make the assumption that all they have to do to raise their grade is to make fewer mistakes. I have had students submit revisions which simply corrected mechanics, but did no rethinking or revising, and they expected a better grade because they had made their papers better. If students receive better grades on revisions solely for less mechanical errors, we have then reinforced the idea that grade is directly related to how many errors a student makes.

There are some other ideas to keep in mind with Electronic Feedback.

Nancy Sommers says that students need some indication of what is most important in a text and what problems are of lesser importance, like a scale of concerns. Our responses should indicate our writing priorities to our students. I tried to indicate those concerns when I wrote this passage to William: **Now, let's talk about some ways to rethink and revise your paper. The majority of your paper discusses applying for and getting the job, but you crunch the actual experience into one paragraph. I think you need to expand on the job itself more. Or, make the focus of your paper applying for, interviewing for, and training for the job and end it there. Of course that deletes most of the last page. You need to decide exactly what you want to get across to your reader. I don't think you want to write <u>all</u> about your summer job - that could be a book - so what particular aspects do you want to focus on? I see that your next step is to decide on a narrower focus for your paper and work the text toward that goal.**

It is imperative that our comments be specific - about what is good, such as my comment to Jackie: **Your quotes from experts and from adoptees themselves makes this a convincing, readable paper.** and also specific about what is not as good:.for example: **On page two I have noted a sentence that just seems out of context because it doesn't give enough information. You simply say the black population has more than doubled the white population, but you don't say what black population and what white population. - In the US, in the World, in New York City, and what is your time frame? 1000 BC to 1992 AD?, or 1982 to 1992?** Students are usually perplexed by 'awkward', 'reword' or 'rewrite'- those vague comments they see on their papers. They need to know specifically what is wrong with a sentence, and in many instances, they also need suggestions for revision. I will sometimes give several options, as suggestions for the path a paper might follow. I gave Joanne a couple of options to spice up her introduction because she thought it was dull, but wasn't sure what to do. I wrote: **Your introduction could combine the first three ideas that I put brackets**

around. Something like - "Tupperware! It has a lifetime guarantee! It is durable, dishwasher proof, and inexpensive. What a deal! But selling Tupperware can be a hard and difficult job. I know that from experience."

Or your introduction could begin right with the story of breaking the ashtray as a way to get our attention and then go into reasons. why selling Tupperware is difficult Example - "I was right in the middle of demonstrating how durable and usable the Ultra 21 roaster was, when it just slipped right out of my hands and crashed to the coffee table shattering a large ashtray. Although the guests were amazed at the fact that the glass roaster was so strong that it didn't have any damage, I was terribly embarrassed. I really don't think that was the best way to demonstrate the outstanding qualities of the roaster."

But, I need to keep in mind that I never want a student to say "Why don't **you** write my paper?"

We need to be aware of the number and type of comments we are making. Students cannot process too many suggestions. They get frustrated and either give up or concentrate on only surface grammatical corrections.

It is also important to be diplomatic in our comments, to praise as well as to blame.

In an article in College Composition and Communication, Greg Sieminski draws an analogy between a surgeon who cuts with a scalpel and the teacher who cuts with a pen. - He says that "both mark their passage across a surface with a thin line of color. Both are used with the intention of exposing something to view. Here the parallel ends, for the surgeon uses the knife to expose another, while the essayist (the student) uses the pen - consciously or not - to expose himself." "Teachers, like surgeons, must learn to guide their writing instruments over the soft white tissue of the spirit and the delicate ribbing of the ego without trampling." "The pen, like the scalpel, can be wielded too liberally." (Quotes from p. 213)

I always begin by pointing out some good in the paper, but then I also give suggestions for revision - often offering choices for several different ways to rethink, like diverging pathways.

Martin feels that we should move in the direction of positive reader-response, that teachers need to provide frequent written responses to students' work. Martin's remarks, which are usually "bits of dialogue about her reactions to content; applause for whatever strengths she sees in the writing; appreciation for evidence of the 'basics' of good writing such as clarity, individual voice, and writer-involvement with material." seldom make mention of weaknesses because she feels that students "will take seriously the possibility that writers can learn from positive reader-like response than from negative criticism."

I feel I must criticize in my comments, but I have also found that sometimes I have commented with too heavy a hand. I haven't been sensitive enough in my zeal.

Jose wrote: **I knew, I couldn't write, however, now I am really convinced of my inabilities. The grade came as a shock to me. It tells me that my writing is worse than I thought.**

Karelle exploded in her journal with: **I felt like it was an insult, it kind of change my mind about writing all of the sudden, it made me feel like I'm now unable to write. It used to be my favorite way of expressing myself. I really don't think so anymore. I don't think I'll take another English class ever in my life after this one. As a matter of fact if I could just resign it, I would. The thing is I need the damn credits . God I hate this. since the beginning of this week all I've gotten is feedback from my dear teachers on how rotten I am in everything .**

Rossy said: **First of all, the grade I received I am certainly not satisfied with, I knew this paper was not an "A" paper but I did not think I would receive a C-. You said this paper is way too short. I didn't think you wanted 10 pages. You only brought out the negative**

points of my paper I don't see any positive points. I will definitely not wait until the last minute to write any papers.

Sieminski said that for teachers and physicians alike, "Even the most compassionate of us can become callous under the strain of our patient load" (p. 2150. And when commenting on paper instead of face to face, we must be doubly careful, because as Sieminski points out, when a patient bleeds the surgeon can monitor vital signs simply by looking at the face. We cannot see our students faces when we write out our comments. We cannot monitor their vital signs.

Given the fact that I feel my students must be computer literate in this changing world, and that they must also become accomplished, clear writers, and that there is not enough time in the classroom for either of those objectives, I am confident I have found one solution to the dilemma: multiple drafts for all writing assignments, each handed back to the student with a lengthy computer generated comment page of detailed, organized, sensitive commentary; personal feelings and reflections; and clear suggestions and strategies for student revision.

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